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THE SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF THE CHINESE.

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THE term speculative philosophy is a little hazy, perhaps, however, not more so than the thing indicated. It represents an early stage of thought prior to the rise of physical science—may we not add prior to, and for the most part in neglect of, that logic whose office it is to analyze the process of reasoning and to fix the limits of knowledge?

Irregular and haphazard as it has shown itself in most countries, it is not inaptly described by the word speculation, as understood in business transactions. Why is it that the speculator in the stock market may, as by the cast of a die, achieve fortune or provoke ruin? Is it not because the unknown and the variable are elements that elude his grasp? Yet the element of uncertainty is precisely that which contributes most to the fascination of his ventures. Has it not been the same with most of those early thinkers who have undertaken to explain the mystery of existence?

When the pole of which they are in search is hedged about by frozen seas, what wonder if their happiest efforts have not been rewarded by complete success? Yet has the pursuit of truth in those regions and in all ages been justly regarded as the most ennobling occupation of the human mind. Nor has it

been barren of results, for may we not apply to speculative philosophy the words of Cowley in regard to alchemy?

The search itself rewards the pains ;
So tho' the Chymist his great secret miss,
For neither it in art nor nature is,
Yet things well worth his toil he gains ;
And doth his charge and labour pay
With good unsought, discoveries by the way.

Would it not be a surprise to find that Chinese explorers in these high latitudes have planted their standard nearer to the pole than those of most other nations?

To show what they have accomplished, I shall not deem it necessary to trace their philosophy, even in outline, from the dawn of speculation, but shall select a period when their speculative thought was most active and when the now dominant philosophy was formulated. Of the forty centuries included in the records of the Chinese Empire, there is one century, and no other, that can be selected as preëminently the age of philosophy. This was at the beginning of the Sung dynasty (1020 to 1120 A.D.), when gross darkness brooded over Europe and when the western world was convulsed by the Crusades. Earlier dynasties had been distinguished by various forms of intellectual activity,—one by the invention of political systems, one by historical writings, one for poetry and the drama, etc.,—but not until this epoch did the Chinese mind evince a disposition to question everything in heaven and earth. In the work of settling anew the foundations of faith and knowledge, five men took the lead, whose family names (two being brothers) fall curiously into an alliterative line of four syllables,—Cheo, Chang, Cheng, Chu.,—all so distinguished that they may be compared to a Pleiad cluster, a constellation (and are there not many such?) whose light has not yet reached our shores. The last named is by far the most celebrated. Not more original than the others, he combined the qualities of a laborious scholar and an acute thinker, and knew how to gather the scattered rays of his predecessors into a focus. Though shining in part by borrowed light, Chuhi looms up like a pharos, taking the third

place among the great teachers of the Chinese people. All five were Confucian scholars, but there can be no doubt that their mental activity was stimulated and its direction determined by the speculations of Buddhist and Taoist writers. Their writings derive immense importance from the fact that for five hundred years, since the publication by imperial authority of the great *Encyclopædia of Philosophy*, they have been accepted by the government as the standard of orthodoxy to which all who aspire to the honors of the civil-service examinations are expected to conform. Their views are therefore to be taken as the views of the educated men of the China of today.

In their mode of philosophizing they resemble Descartes more than Bacon. Their method is *a priori*, and, like the great Frenchman who had read Bacon and rejected his doctrine, they adopted theirs, not through ignorance of the experimental method, but from choice. Confucius himself had laid down the maxim that "knowledge comes from the study of *things*," a maxim which seems as much out of place in his pages as that fine aphorism which sets forth the value of experiment does in those of Plato: ἐμπειρία ποιεῖ τὸν αἰῶνα ἡμῶν πορεύεσθαι κατὰ τέχνην, ἀπειρία δὲ κατὰ τύχην.¹

The Chinese assert that their sage wrote a treatise on the experimental study of nature, but that it was lost, and this fact they offer as an excuse for the backwardness of their country in that department of science. Descartes' preference for the deductive method sprang from his mathematical genius. On the part of the Chinese it was due to a desire to follow what they considered the order of nature. Both esteemed it most rational to do as Stanley did in exploring the Congo—to strike the stream at its head and follow it down to the sea—rather than with Bacon to enter the mouth and creep slowly upward against the current. Which is the more daring feat and which the more certain method needs not be pointed out. To compare the two methods and define the province of each, does not belong to our present theme. Suffice it to say that the champions of the one

¹ Experiment [or experience, for in Greek as in French the word means both] causes the world to go forward in a scientific way; the want of it, in a haphazard manner.—*Gorgias*.

not infrequently made use of the other. When the Baconian got hold of a great principle, he did not fail to deduce its consequences; nor, on the other hand, did a Cartesian neglect to appeal to experiment. With the former experiment preceded discovery; with the latter it was employed to confirm conclusions.

Practical as the Chinese mind confessedly is, it is not a little remarkable that in the study of nature Chinese philosophers have never made extensive use of the inductive method. That they have not been unacquainted with it is evident from the following questions and answers found in the writings of the brothers Cheng:

"One asked, whether to arrive at a knowledge of nature it is necessary to investigate each particular object; or may not some one thing be seized upon from which the knowledge of many things may be derived?"

"The Master replied: 'A comprehensive knowledge of nature is not so easily acquired. You must examine one thing today, and another thing tomorrow, and when you have accumulated a store of facts, your knowledge will burst its shell and come forth into fuller light, connecting all the particulars by general laws.'"

In view of this lucid response of one of their great oracles, who can deny that the Chinese had a clear conception of the inductive method five hundred years before Bacon? But, as Channing says, "Great men are not so much distinguished by difference of ideas, as by different degrees in the impression made by the same idea." Contrast with this a dictum of Chang, the second of the five: "To know nature, you must first know heaven. If you have pushed your science so far as to know heaven, then you are at the source of all things. Knowing their evolution you can tell what ought to be, and what ought not to be, without waiting for anyone to inform you." The former statement made no impression on the Chinese mind, while the latter is universally regarded as its guiding star. How different must have been the history of the world had Chinese thinkers, instead of seeking for a short cut to universal knowledge, been content to study one thing at a time, with a view to "connecting all the particulars by general laws."

In accordance with the principle so confidently enunciated, Chang and his followers (and his predecessors as well) have directed their main attack to the problems of cosmogony, believing that they might thereby arrive at the "source of all things." Tomes are filled with conjectures and reasonings which it would be unprofitable to follow out in detail. The results, however, if I may so call them, which they reached by a sort of happy guess work, are not unworthy of notice, forming as they do the philosophical creed of educated China.

Stimulated, as I have said, by the speculations of Buddhist and Taoist schools, they took care to follow neither; and betray the influence of these sectaries chiefly by the pains they are at to steer a middle course between the two. To the one school, mind is the only entity, and matter a deceptive figment of the imagination; to the other, matter is the sole essence, and mind one of its products. Each inculcated a species of monism. The thinkers of the Sung dynasty, combining these one-sided conceptions, boldly asserted a dualism in nature, and fix on *li* and *chi*, force and matter, as the seminal principles of the universe.²

It is a little startling, is it not, to find them at that early date hitting on a generalization which to us appears among the late results of modern science? Yet we shall see as we advance that this is not the only instance in which their unscientific speculations have anticipated the teachings of modern science.

Both terms in their dual formula require elucidation. Of the two principles, one is active, the other passive. I have rendered *li* by the word "force," as being active, but it is not mere force. The word signifies a principle of order, a law of nature. It is often synonymous with *Tao*, "reason," answering to the Greek *logos*. When Chuhi says that "heaven is *li*," he evidently means that the prime force in the universe is reason,—exactly the position maintained by the Taoists, though they use *Tao*, and not *li*, to express the idea. With both, this reason, if we may so call it, is rather a property of mind than mind itself. Each denies its

² They profess to derive their doctrines from the Yiking, the Chinese Genesis—and so do the Taoists. It is surprising with what skill each school succeeds in reading its tenets into that ancient text, parts of which are referred to B. C. 2800!

personality, not perceiving that a property implies a substance, and that in this case the substance must be mind.

Chi, the second term of the formula, being passive, is matter. In popular use, however, it is limited to matter in a gaseous form and in these philosophical speculations it means primordial matter. Hear what they say of it:

In a treatise called *Chengmeng*, "right discipline for youth," Chang, with a thoroughness characteristic of the Chinese, begins with the origin of the universe. "The immensity of space, though called the great void," he says, "is not void. It is filled with a subtile substance. In fact, there is no such thing as a vacuum.' Now what is this omnipresent "subtile substance"? If we compare the descriptions of it given by these writers, we cannot resist the conclusion that it is ether; not the ether of the Greeks, the burning air, the empyrean, but the all-pervading ether of our modern science. It is the stuff out of which matter was produced. This is now a familiar idea, not of science, but of scientific speculation. It is set forth with special fullness in a work on the unseen universe, by those eminent professors, P. G. Tate and Balfour Stewart, along with the correlative doctrine of the reversion of matter to its primitive state.

Our Chinese philosophers taught the same thing centuries ago. What says the author of *Right Discipline*? His words are: "Within the immensity of space matter is alternately concentrated and dissipated, much as ice is congealed or dissolved in water." Not merely do they antedate these English writers in making it the source of matter, they seem to have hit on the dynamical theory of the molecule, and particularly on vortex motion, as the process of transformation. Cheo, a contemporary of Chang, is known as the author of a diagram of cosmogony. He begins with a ring or circle of uniform whiteness, representing the primitive uniform ether. Then follows a circle partly dark, which shows the original substance differentiated into two forms, or rather forces, called *Yin* and *Yang*. Speaking of this diagram, "It shows," says Chu., the great expositor of the Chinese canonical books, "how the primitive void is transformed into matter." The two forces, *mo lai mo chü*, grind back and forth in opposite

directions, and the detritus resulting from their friction is what we call matter."

Perhaps the most striking point in this Chinese cosmogony is the account it gives of the creation of light. *Taiki tung rh sheng yang*, "The primal essence moved, and light was born." That the mode of motion was vibratory they also conjectured, but I do not assert that they ever carried their researches so far as to measure the length of a luminous wave, a performance which may now be witnessed any day in our physical laboratories. The occidental theory of the ether and its functions is confirmed by a magnificent array of scientific facts; the oriental theory, standing apart from experimental science, never emerged from the state of speculation; a speculation wonderfully acute and sublime, in which the scientific imagination shows itself to the best advantage, divining as if by instinct great truths which require for their confirmation the slower processes of patient investigation. Nor must we forget that in the West this theory existed in the state of a discarded speculation for at least two centuries before it received the seal of science.

The first European to get a glimpse of the circumambient ocean was René Descartes. His mistake in referring the motions of the planets to whirlpools of ether brought discredit on his whole system, notwithstanding the fact that he also held that minute vortices were necessary to explain the constitution of matter. But what a glorious resurrection awaited it! In the last year of the last century, touched literally by a sunbeam, it woke from its long slumber. Young found it necessary to the hypothesis of undulations, to which he was led by the interference of rays, and Fresnel resorted to it to explain the phenomena of polarization. If this revival enhances the respect with which we regard the "father of modern philosophy," should it not also reflect a little luster on those early thinkers of the far East who made the Cartesian ether the basis of their cosmogony?

Two or three doctrines that have played a great part in the intellectual movements of our age remain to be noticed as having been long ago propounded by the speculative philosophers of China. That they should have some conception of an evolutionary process in nature is not to be wondered at. What but

a most thoroughgoing doctrine of evolution is to be expected from men who begin with the evolution of matter? The original unity of matter, suggested by modern researches in molecular physics, we may remark, was assumed in all of their cosmological speculations. What the eminent physicist, J. W. Draper, says of the alchemists of Europe is true in a still higher degree of those of China who led the way, both in speculation and investigation. "They were the first to seize the grand idea of evolution in its widest extent as a progress from the imperfect to the more perfect in lifeless as well as living nature, in an increasing progression in which all things take part toward a higher and nobler state." This view is prominent in the writings of many of the philosophers of ancient China.

Here is a statement from the works of one of the Cheng brothers, which shows that they came very near to the doctrine of the conservation of energy. He says: "Body in motion is force. Its contact with another is followed by a reaction or effect. This effect in turn acts as a force producing another effect, and so on without end." "Here," he adds, "is a vast subject for the student of philosophy." The Chinese "students of philosophy" have not troubled themselves to verify this, any more than other shrewd guesses of their predecessors. The remark, however, which Chu. makes on this passage shows a comprehensive grasp of the idea. "Heaven and earth," he says, "with all they contain, are nothing but transformations of one primitive force."

In conclusion, the cosmogony of our Chinese philosophers is by no means so atheistic as it might appear. True, Chuhi, the authorized expounder of their system, says: "We must beware of thinking that there is a *man* up in the sky who controls the motion of the universe." But he does not deny that there is a power at work whose nature is inscrutable. Says Chang, the most daring of the five: "The great void is filled with a pure or perfect fluid. Since it is perfectly fluid, it offers no obstruction to movement" (*i. e.*, it neither impedes motion nor is its proper motion impeded). "There being no obstruction [*i. e.*, nothing to bring about a change of state], a divine force converts the pure

into the gross." To explain the creation of matter, he invokes, though reluctantly, the intervention of a *divine* power. Is it not what Horace calls *Nodus tali vindice dignus*?

That our Chinese thinkers meant God in a proper sense, I will not affirm, but they considerably leave room for him. Have we not seen that one of the dual principles postulated by them is invested with some of the "attributes of mind"? They dogmatize about self-acting laws, but there is reason to expect that another generation will come to understand that law implies mind, and will proclaim with Emerson that "conscious law is king of kings." To them our western school of agnosticism is, as yet, unknown. In that line, too, they are in advance of us by several centuries. But *their* agnosticism is of a milder type than ours. It is not aggressive, neither is it so bigoted as not to be open to conviction. It is, moreover, as the occidental is not, profoundly reverential. For this habit of mind it is indebted to Confucius, who, to wean his people from debasing forms of idolatry, employed for the Supreme Being the vague term Heaven, and discouraged them from prying into those transcendental mysteries hidden by the veil of blue. He believed, however, in a moral government, and so do all of his followers to this day. He ascribed to the object of his reverence more of personality than they are willing to admit. "The superior man," he said, "fears three things, and the first is Heaven." "With what words does Heaven speak to us?" he asks again. "The seasons run their rounds, and animal and vegetable life displays itself in a hundred forms. These are the language of Heaven." He approaches far nearer to the Christian idea of God than the negations of Buddha, or the metamorphoses of Taoism; and there is reason to hope that his disciples will come back to the mental attitude of their great master, which has been somewhat obscured by later speculations. To bring them back, and to carry them beyond it, they require, above all things, a truer logic and a juster psychology than they have ever possessed.

Happy will it be for China when those who control the opinions of the people learn in that vague Power of which they stand in awe to recognize the *Pater Mundi*.